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The forgotten side of the 1960s comes to the White House.

Officer Ed Meese

By Jeff Stein

BY THE 1960s, confounding Gertrude Stein, there was a "there" in Oakland, California. It was a vast, steaming ghetto; Black Panthers and violent rebellion; Bobby Seale and Huey Newton; the outlaw Hell's Angels; the hippies and the radicals on Telegraph Avenue. Edwin Meese III, a young deputy district attorney, lived in Oakland then too. But his was a different city and a different decade. Meese's neighborhood was the Oakland of the East Bay Hills, the placid part of town where the postman watched the family grow and the house add a wing, where the kids left their bikes outside all night. It was an Oakland that seemed carved out of Wisconsin and plunked down on the hills above the San Francisco Bay. In the popular chronicles of the 1960s, that Oakland plays only a cameo role. The books and articles and movies recall the Panthers, the free speech movement, People's Park, acid, sex, and Country Joe and the Fish—a time of protest and experimentation, draft resisters and apocalyptic fantasy. But it is Ed Meese—along with the other cops, prosecutors, and California law enforcement planners who worked the forgotten side of the 1960s—who is in the White House today.

Like the Reagan presidency, the Reagan governorship cut social welfare budgets, attacked legal services, and adopted strong law-and-order rhetoric and programs. And because the political landscape has been relatively serene for the past half-decade, it is sometimes assumed—especially in Washington—that campus protest, labor unrest, and race riots have permanently gone, never to return. Yet the potential for unrest exists. The introduction of only a handful of American advisers into El Salvador brought 100,000 demonstrators into the streets last May. A quarter of a million turned out for the Solidarity Day march on September 19. There is widespread sentiment for a new draft as the Reagan military commitment deepens. There is muted support for internal security investigations and covert action from within the Republican party. The first round of budget cuts, along with rises in fuel prices, inflation, interest rates, and unemployment in the industrial north, could result in social upheavals and a higher crime rate. How would the Reagan administration handle it? The outlines of a presidential program for combating crime are only just beginning to emerge, but the record of the governorship provides a wealth of clues for the future.

It was Meese's record for prosecuting pot smokers and student protesters around Berkeley that brought him to the attention of Governor Reagan. It was Meese who dealt most directly with the riots and protest that shook California in the 1960s and 1970s and who helped the state develop an enormous law-enforcement establishment. And it is Meese who will be charged with developing a similar national program for the 1980s. "You always have to view Ed in the context of his father, who fits the classic image of the public servant," said Robert Wallach, a close Meese friend and San Francisco attorney. "I think Ed's attitude toward criminal justice is rooted in a sense of orderliness about society. He really believes in what we cynically call the basic American values. The Meeses are a very simple family in the sense of their material wants. They say grace before every meal. They're the prototype of the Norman Rockwell America."

The Meese name was well known in Oakland long before young Ed became a prosecutor. His paternal grandfather was an Oakland city councilman and treasurer. His father was Alameda County's treasurer and tax collector for a quarter-century. And before he married her, Ursula Herrick Meese had been a probation officer. Her father was an Oakland postmaster. "Finding someone around here who doesn't like Ed Meese," a senior California police officer told me with a laugh, "must be like trying to find a four-year-old who doesn't like Santa Claus." Even Jerry Brown's aides were astonished at the reputation Meese left behind in Sacramento, where he was a senior Reagan aide beginning in 1969. "It's funny," said one, a former antiwar activist. "After seven years, I'm sure the head of this department doesn't know the name of a single secretary. But Meese made sure he knew them all. And they remember it. They still love him."

Most people described Meese as a cool, professional conciliator. "If he had a temper, I never really saw it," said California deputy attorney general Roger Ventura. Other law enforcement officials gushed about Meese. "A renaissance man," Bill Medigovitch, a California intelligence specialist, called him. "It was like he was earmarked for destiny." Under Meese's direction,

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